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ABSTRACT

This publication was prepared as a resource guide to teaching strategies that help students understand the background, nature, and pervasive influence of the U.S. Constitution in the lives of every citizen. As the Constitutional Bicentennial approaches, the focus in many social studies classes increasingly will be on teaching about this most important document. Results from two recent textbook evaluation studies showed that the treatment of the Constitution in U.S. history, government, and civics textbooks is inadequate and incomplete. Because they lack in-depth coverage of the Constitution, textbooks should be used as part of a larger group of resources that include many types of supplementary materials. Supplementary curricula developed by projects commemorating the Constitution are described. In addition, brief descriptions are provided of on-going projects dealing with the Constitution that are funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. An annotated listing of ERIC documents dealing with the Constitution is also included. The documents fall into the categories of law-related education, citizenship education, and student participation or community involvement. (RM)

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TEACHING ABOUT THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

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ERIC DIGEST NO. 12

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TEACHING ABOUT THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

Because social studies educators have the primary responsibility for teaching about the United States Constitution, they have always been concerned with how this document might be approached most effectively. Now, as the Constitutional Bicentennial approaches, the focus in many social studies courses will increasingly be on teaching about this important subject. This ERIC Digest was prepared as a resource guide to teaching strategies which help students understand the background, nature, and pervasive influence of the U.S. Constitution in the lives of every citizen.

Are textbooks sufficient resources for teaching about the Constitution?

Results from two recent textbook evaluation studies commissioned by Project '87, a project sponsored by the American Historical Association and the American Political Science Association (1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20036), and the Indiana University Social Studies Development Center provide an answer to this question. The studies compared the coverage of constitutional issues in widely-used textbooks.

John J. Patrick (Social Studies Development Center, Indiana University) found that the treatment of the Constitution in American history textbooks for grades 8 and 11 is inadequate and incomplete. The texts (1) do not give enough emphasis to the positive features of the Articles of Confederation, (2) present brief, shallow, and bland descriptions of the ratification process, (3) provide little information about the Amendments, (4) treat judicial review superficially, and (5) rarely demonstrate how changes in the Constitution are connected to political events. The textbooks also fail to include several important topics--the ambiguous division of powers between national and state government that resulted from the Constitutional Convention, several landmark Supreme Court decisions and dissenting opinions, and connections between Supreme Court decisions from different eras.

Richard C. Remy (Mershon Center, Ohio State University) found a number of weaknesses in the way that government and civic textbooks handle the Constitution. His study revealed both boring narrative and little in-depth coverage of Supreme Court issues. Most significantly, Remy found that the textbooks do not cover the significance of the Constitution, fail to connect constitutional topics to each other and the rest of the narrative, rarely compare the role of the Constitution in the American political system and other political systems, and miss opportunities to relate discussions of historical institutions, issues, and events to the Constitution.

Both Patrick and Remy conclude that textbooks should not be the only instructional aids in teaching about the Constitution. They can help students acquire knowledge and concepts and achieve objectives. However, since textbook treatment of the Constitution can be poor and incomplete, they should be used as part of a larger group of resources that includes many types of supplementary materials.

Complete versions of the Patrick and Remy studies appear in TEACHING ABOUT THE CONSTITUTION IN AMERICAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS, edited by Howard D. Mehlinger (American Historical Association, 400 A St., S.E., Washington, DC 20003 and the American Political Science Association, 1527 New Hampshire Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20036, 1981).

What supplementary materials have been developed by projects commemorating the Constitution?

Project '87 and the National Endowment for the Humanities (Office of the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution, 1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20506) are currently the two most active supporters of Bicentennial events. Both are involved in projects related to the teaching of the Constitution.

Two Project '87 programs focus on education: Stage II, teaching the Constitution in schools and colleges, and Stage III, the development of public programs that will heighten public awareness of the Constitution and provoke informed discussion of Constitutional themes. Several activities sponsored as part of these stages are of interest to classroom educators.

In 1980 Project '87 and the Indiana University Social Studies Development Center co-sponsored a conference on "Teaching the Constitution in American Schools." Papers and recommendations from conference participants were published in TEACHING ABOUT THE CONSTITUTION IN AMERICAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS. A quarterly periodical, THIS CONSTITUTION, began publication in September 1983. The first section of the magazine consists of essays by specialists that suggest themes and topics for Bicentennial programs. Documents related to the Constitution, an explanation of their content, and an analysis of their importance are featured in the second section. The last section describes upcoming Bicentennial events and funding sources for Bicentennial programs and activities.

Finally, a curriculum resource book for teaching about the Constitution has been developed. LESSONS ON THE CONSTITUTION: SUPPLEMENTS TO HIGH SCHOOL COURSES IN AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND AMERICAN HISTORY (SO 015 026) by John J. Patrick and Richard C. Remy contains lessons designed to remedy textbook deficiencies and enrich current textbook treatments regarding Constitutional history and principles of government.

This ERIC Digest was prepared by Sheryl B. Robinson, Staff Associate, ERIC/ChESS and the Social Science Education Consortium, Inc.

The National Endowment for the Humanities inaugurated a special initiative in 1982 to encourage "scholarly interest in the public reflection on the principles and foundations of constitutional government." Twenty-one planning grants have been awarded under this rubric. Projects of interest include:

--American Enterprise Institute, 1150 17th St., N.W., Suite 1200, Washington, DC 20036.
To support three annual conferences, three volumes of essays, and six televised public policy forums on the Constitution as the ultimate source of national political life.

--Columbia University Teachers College, 525 West 120th St., Box 75, New York, NY 10027.
To support planning for public programs and educational materials that explore the concepts embodied in the U.S. Constitution in shaping American society.

--North Carolina State University, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Raleigh, NC 27650.
To support the development of study units focusing on theoretical, historical, and contemporary constitutional issues for distribution through the University's Humanities Extension Program.

--University of Oklahoma, College of Liberal Studies, 1700 Asp Ave., Norman, OK 73037.
To support planning for a Constitutional Bicentennial Resource Center for the purpose of organizing public programs and study materials.

These project descriptions have been reprinted from the September 1983 edition of THIS CONSTITUTION: A BICENTENNIAL CHRONICLE, Project '87's quarterly magazine. As new projects are funded, they will be listed in future issues of the magazine.

What resources for teaching about the Constitution are available through the ERIC system?

Numerous documents on the Constitution have been indexed in RESOURCES IN EDUCATION (RIE). At the present time most of the documents have been developed by traditional and nontraditional social studies projects and programs. While nontraditional program materials are not sufficient to remedy the shortcomings of textbooks, they can be useful supplements to more comprehensive treatments of the Constitution. These programs fall into the categories law-related education, citizenship education, and student participation or community involvement. As products developed by special projects commemorating the Constitutional Bicentennial become available, they are added to the ERIC system.

ERIC documents are available for viewing in microfiche at libraries that subscribe to the ERIC collection. Microfiche copies of documents can also be purchased from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (Box 190, Arlington, VA 22210). Paper copies of many documents can also be purchased from EDRS, while others are available from the original publisher. Check RIE for ordering information.

SO 015 026. LESSONS ON THE CONSTITUTION: SUPPLEMENTS TO HIGH SCHOOL COURSES IN AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND AMERICAN HISTORY, by John J. Patrick and Richard C. Remy (American Historical Association and American Political Science Association, 1982). Contains lessons on the U.S. Constitution that are designed to be used in combination with standard high school textbooks. Includes bibliographies of additional print and nonprint materials.

ED 223 524. VOTER EDUCATION LESSON PLANS (Institute for Political and Legal Education, 1974). Contains 12 lesson plans designed to have students register and vote in upcoming elections, participate in election campaigns, and increase their knowledge of the political system.

ED 227 017. LAW IN U.S. HISTORY: A TEACHER RESOURCE MANUAL, edited by Melinda R. Smith (Social Science Education Consortium and ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 1983). Contains activities on the U.S. Constitution and the Supreme Court that can be infused into U.S. history courses. Teaching methods include opinion polls/surveys, role plays, simulations, case studies, and mock trials.

ED 214 586. THE FEDERALIST PAPERS RE-EXAMINED, edited by Harold B. Lippman and Elena Van Meter (League of Women Voters Education Fund, 1977). Summarizes the main themes of a seminar that focused on the Federalist Papers, the Bill of Rights, congressional performance, the American presidency, judicial power, and American federalism.

ED 211 513. THE LAW STUDIES MOVEMENT AND THE BICENTENNIALS OF 1987 and 1991, by Isidore Starr (1981). Describes how law-related inquiry could enrich citizenship education in the teaching of the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

ED 205 969. A PROPOSED PRESS LAW AND RESPONSIBILITIES TEACHING UNIT FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS, by Thomas Eveslage (1981). Contains a unit prepared to increase students' understanding and appreciation of the First Amendment and its implied responsibilities.

ED 197 895. NATIVE AMERICANS: THE CONSTITUTION OF THE IROQUOIS LEAGUE, by Katie Beals and John J. Carusone. Discusses ideas about the power of government, the rights of the people, and the implementation of the laws as practiced by the Iroquois League which were incorporated into the Constitution of the United States.

ED 178 402. OUR CONSTITUTION AND GOVERNMENT: LESSON WORKSHEETS. Federal Textbook on Citizenship-Home Study Course. Revised Edition. (Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1978). Contains 21 worksheets and background information on the American Constitution and government designed to assist candidates for naturalization.

ED 171 634. THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES (1979). Explains the role of the Supreme Court as the constitutional interpreter and applicator of the United States governmental system, reviewing a history of the development of that role.

ED [illegible] 161. THE U.S. CONSTITUTION AND ITS DEVELOPMENT (1976). Contains seven papers that focus on constitutional issues such as women's rights, interpretive problems in the formation of the Constitution, and myths, opinions, and facts about the U.S. Constitution from a 1976 social studies conference.